



Book reviews



**Steel Trails:
Chasing Arizona
Trains in the 1950's,**
by J.R. Knoll,
published by
FriendlySP,
7788 East Whileaway

Place, Tucson AZ 85750 (www.friendlysp.com).
Softcover, 116 11•×8 1/2• pages; \$30.00.

It wasn't all that long after relocating to Tucson Arizona, from northern New Jersey that the local railroad, the Union Pacific, grabbed my undivided attention. The ex-Southern Pacific Sunset Route runs right through the center of Tucson and under Union Pacific ownership it is one of the busiest east-west mainlines in the country. As a modeler, I am firmly grounded in the late 1940's. However, as a photographer, the efficiency of stack trains, the phenomenal power, aesthetics and yes the grace of six-axle GE AC's and EMD 70 and 80's moving through the space and light of the Arizona Sonoran Desert blows me away.

I venture trackside a few times a month, usually late in the day when the light paints the desert in the rich, warm tones that have traditionally attract and inspire artists from around the world. The traffic is such on the Sunset Route that a scanner is not necessary. I find a scenic location, not a stretch in southern Arizona, wait a half hour or so and the UP usually provides trains in multiples. If I hit a rare, slow day for trains, the light and the landscape prove just as mesmerizing, it's never a wasted or "bad" trip.

In those down times between trains it's easy for the mind to wander and wonder what the Sonoran landscape looked like with A-B-B-A F-units and enormous cab-forwards pulling long blocks of

reefers east, streamline GS 4-8-4's or sleek E-units on the point of name passenger trains and purposeful Moguls and Consolidations serving the local cattle and international trade south into Mexico.

During the "Golden Age" of railroading, that age defined by the two decades after World War II, gifted artists took cameras trackside to witness and record the profound change the industry went through during that period. Most of these shooters became forever associated with a specific geographical region of the country. The Northeast had Hastings, Shaughnessey, Collins, and T.J. McNamara, the west had Steinheimer, Duke, and Sims, The Northwest R.V. Nixon and Mcgee to name just a few notables from that period. Yes some of these very shooters ventured into Arizona, but it was usually "up north" on the Santa Fe mainline, more readily accessible east and west via Route 66.

Period photos of favorite places I frequent today on the Sunset-Dragoon, Mescal, Benson, Cienega Creek, through the old warehouse district or past the restored Espee depot in downtown Tucson- seemed few and far between. So I was surprised when, leaving a local hobby shop, I chanced upon a photo book on a spinner usually reserved for monographs on realistic operation, how-to scenery, your first train set, etc. The book was *Steel Trails; Chasing Arizona Trains in the 1950's*, by J.R. Knoll. I'd never heard of J.R. Knoll, but my initial leaf through immediately told me this was a genuine discovery; an unknown photographer, a Tucsonian, with a gifted eye commensurate with other top shooters of the era.

When I finally sat down and began to spend time on each image it was soon apparent that the railroads of Arizona, particularly the Sunset Route did, finally, indeed have a representative visual voice in Mr. Knoll. Horizontal soft cover format, the book is designed and edited by John Signor, no stranger to things visually stunning and of course Southern Pacific. Mr. Knoll's images could not be in more capable hands to be presented in a positively elegant manner; a real treat throughout are John's signature maps, perfect compliment to placing the images within the exact areas they were taken.

The first 45 pages are devoted to the Espee's mainline Sunset Route; its line south from Tucson to Nogales, Mexico and the meandering branchline from Nogales, Arizona, up through high cattle

country of Patagonia and Sonoita. The center section of the book covers the Santa Fe, and the final third of the book covers Arizona's often remote and unique logging and copper railroads. Given the softcover nature of the book the coverage is remarkable and of incredibly high quality image wise.

A few years after World War II, Knoll and his mom took up residence in downtown Tucson. A short bicycle ride gave easy access to the Tucson depot and roundhouse a bit further east.

It's often difficult with restored Southern Pacific No. 4449 roaming the west for a couple of decades not to associate the Southern Pacific GS-4 locomotives with the *Daylight* train. The photo spread on pages 12 and 13, however, show a more purposeful GS-4. By the early 1950's they wore black dress, with only the silver smokebox front and sheet metal pilot alluding to a more colorful past.

I suspect Knoll snapped this picture from atop a boxcar. It features a beautifully side-lit GS 4445 as it cants past what is today Tucson's artist warehouse district with a substantial length train of eastbound heavyweights filling the distant curve. From this grand visual entrance to "The Old Pueblo" we are treated to pages of rich imagery of routine daily events—day and night on the Espee through Tucson over half a century ago. From purposeful 2-8-0's to early Baldwin diesel switchers, infamous cab-forwards, AB- B-A F's, the unique 0-6-0T roundhouse switcher, and limiteds, locals and streamliners, all come alive as if today through Mr. Knoll's gifted eye. There are tantalizing views of the once great, sprawling PFE complex. (If there was a longer icing platform in the country I've not seen it.)

East of Tucson to Wilcox is some of the most compelling southwest desert mountain scenery. Remote and not easily accessible in the 1950's, nevertheless, Knoll made the effort and got to places like Cienega Creek, Mescal and Sibyl: places I frequent today and bring first time rail afflicted visitors to Tucson to view.

Knoll not just recorded in ¾-view the passing of trains, he placed them in the spiritual and spacious environment of Arizona with a sensitivity that oftentimes approaches reverence. There is a section devoted to the Espee line south out of Tucson 60 miles or so to the Mexican border at Nogales. The images from this section are both delightful and haunting. In the 1950's, today's sprawling and populous retirement region of Green Valley was not

even an idea. The remoteness of the line, the mountains and mining region of twin buttes was a draw for Knoll and are some of the finest images in the book.

The photo on page 33 of a stock train heading south to Cananea, Sonora, Mexico, with the brakemen riding the cupola in the oppressive desert heat captures the essence and stark beauty that is the Sonoran Desert on either side of the border.

Today, the Espee mainline through Phoenix is almost secondary in nature. Stacks, solid auto trains and general freights between Long Beach and El Paso by-pass Phoenix through Casa Grande. Back in the fifties, passenger and freight regularly rolled through Phoenix. It is in this section of the book we begin to experience and appreciate Knolls' sensitivity towards the railroad worker. There are numerous photos of men at work and they set a tone which continues through the rest of the volume. There are vignettes with workers which translate into scenes on any model railroad: the two brakeman walking to their caboose to begin a day of local switching could be anywhere on any railroad at that time. The Richfield fuel dealer in the background will delight modelers attentive to period detail. Knoll is masterful in inclusion of details of the environment.

Santa Fe in Arizona is like saying The Pennsy in Pennsylvania, it was and remains a huge presence in the state, even under today's BNSF. The east-west line between the California and New Mexico border has always been one of the busiest mainlines in the U.S. As mentioned earlier, paralleling U.S. Rt. 66 made it accessible to many famous and gifted photographers from all regions of the country. Knoll presents stunning views of the mainline that include PA's, F's in freight and passenger service, RSD-15 Alligators in all seasons and in all the famous locations: Flagstaff, Williams and La Posada at Winslow. This section is finely edited to a few pages of images, but provides great coverage.

It is the Peavine, the Santa Fe secondary mainline, that Knoll gives the reader the best trip on the Santa Fe. This line dropped south off the east west mainline at Ash Fork and meandered through some of Arizona's most rugged and remote scenery on its way through Prescott to Phoenix. The photos reveal A-B-B-B-A F-units, quartets of silver and black Geep 7's and 9's, additional sets of Geep helpers employed between Skull Valley and Prescott and Warbonnet FT's, so you can immediately appreciate how the Peavine was a

must-see to those who knew of its scenic and motive-power wonders. Again, while abbreviated a bit today—trains no longer gain Prescott—the Peavine remains an attraction to railroad shooters visiting Arizona.

No coverage of the Santa Fe in Arizona would be complete without the Santa Fe's prominence at the Grand Canyon. It was the Santa Fe line from Williams to the south rim that really opened the Grand Canyon to everyone wishing to partake of the breathtaking wonder. Santa Fe's Fred Harvey built El Tovar, to this day the finest hotel ever to look over the Grand Canyon or any other National Park for that matter. Somehow a pair of torpedo boat Geeps waiting patiently with a mix of streamline and heavyweight equipment defines the line. Yes, today's Grand Canyon Railroad FPA-4's and summer steam make a bold statement in the same location. However, Knoll's images of how Santa Fe did it day to day with the purposeful GP7 and 9 possess a simple magic that stays with the soul.

By the 1950's there were but two logging railroads left in Arizona: Southwest Lumber in the White Mountain region and The Saginaw & Manistee south of Flagstaff. Knoll spent time at each and the images of plow equipped Consolidations and articulateds, along with a variety of tanks and tenders are delightful and thorough. Many of the images were taken in first light of day or sunset, the razor sharp silver edges jump off the page. The railroad workers are, as in previous chapters, given homage in this section too, from brakemen to loggers to an Apache Railroad conductor appearing at the side door of a caboose holding cans of motion picture film for the local movie theater. These images of the workers bring the railroads to life.

Rounding out this special monograph on Arizona railroads is coverage of the many copper railroads—from meandering rugged steam lines to the enormous pit at Ajo with steeple cab electrics winding their way up and around the slope of the pit hauling dump cars of copper ore. Make no mistake this is rugged western terrain, the trains often dwarfed to being almost incidental by the magnificent scenery. Again, Knoll acknowledges the workers in dignified slices of time gone by. The photo of the Hayden local crew awaiting orders in the small but purposeful depot is one of the finest images in the book and it doesn't include a train. Know, too, that this chapter on copper railroads is the stuff of model railroading. The coverage of the

copper roads is a primer for those mining minded modelers seeking out something a bit more esoteric than the usual coal or iron ore.

Yes, you can tell I really like the book and the incredible eye of the artist! Knoll's images provide a sensitive and beautiful interpretation of the vast and spiritual space that is Arizona. The love and awe of the landscape and trains, and the respect and dignity afforded those who worked it daily is evident early on and never once falters throughout.

Chasing trains in Arizona is a difficult and sometimes dangerous endeavor in the often hostile landscape and blistering desert climate, particularly in pre-Interstate Highway Arizona. Knoll literally left no stone unturned. He covered it all. There are some images that will leave you breathless, others will give you silent pause and reflection. J.R. Knoll was a master of his craft.

I sight his names in reverence to his profession because this is a bittersweet review. I just recently found out Knoll had passed away a mere few months before I discovered this fine book. As I returned to his images many times while preparing the review I thought as a fellow Tucsonian I might get to meet him and personally thank him for such a fine work. Sadly, that is not to be, but he has left behind a truly stunning legacy in *Steel Trails; Chasing Arizona Trains in the 1950's*.

It is my humble opinion that Arizona does indeed have a gifted, native son railroad photographer. J.R. Knoll is the one, who should, and I suspect will be, associated as such in the grand railroad image tradition of Hastings and Vermont, Steinheimer and California, Shaughnessey's greater Northeast and other legendary photographers and the regions and railroads they so lovingly interpreted and placed on film. I highly recommend this volume with its fine and incredibly sensitive collection of Southwest railroad images. —DON SPIRO

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